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Students Write for Human Rights

Dec. 9, 2016

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Since 2011, Peruvian farmer and environmental activist Máxima Acuña has been facing violence and harassment after refusing to sell her land to the biggest gold mining project in South America. Although she is nearly 4,000 miles away from Bloomington-Normal, the Illinois Wesleyan University community has joined Acuña in fighting for her rights.

Dozens of students and faculty members came together to write letters on behalf of Acuña and other individuals at [Amnesty International's](#) annual Write for Rights event. These letters are petitions to release people imprisoned for expressing their opinions, or to support human rights defenders and end human rights abuses.

The welcoming atmosphere of the Write for Rights event included music and refreshments, encouraging people to take time out of their busy schedules and help affect change. Those attending could choose to write letters protesting children with albinism being hunted for their body parts, or for Indigenous people struggling to save their ancestral lands from government takeover.



Tung Nguyen '17 from Hanoi, Vietnam (left), Megan Zsorey '19 of Chandler, Ariz., and Professor of French Chris Callahan (in the background) petition government leaders.

"Sometimes the best thing to do is to get down on your knees and start working for other people, before you can actually improve your own life," said Ruiz.

Amnesty International is a global organization that is primarily dedicated to fulfilling human rights around the world. Numerous international chapters participate in the advocacy of human rights and community education surrounding this issue.



Amnesty International RSO President Emily Haas '17 puts the finishing touches on the Write for Rights poster.

Carlos Ruiz '20, treasurer of the [Amnesty International Registered Student Organization](#) (RSO), said it was difficult for the RSO to select four cases out of the possible 30 provided by Amnesty International, but making those selections was important so letter-writers could connect with the people on a personal level.

"We could debate about who we want to advocate for," said Ruiz. "For me, this guy [Native American activist] Leonard [Peltier] stood out." Peltier's indictment and conviction in the murder of two FBI agents in 1975 has been the subject of considerable controversy over the past 40 years.

Emily Haas '17, the president of Illinois Wesleyan's Amnesty RSO, said participants wrote more than 80 letters. "The way to change is being politically active and trying to talk to people in government," said Haas. "This is a good way of getting started."

In conjunction with Human Rights Day on Dec. 10, Write for Rights is just one way to encourage people to petition for the rights of those suffering from injustice.